

Retrospective at Vico Morcote

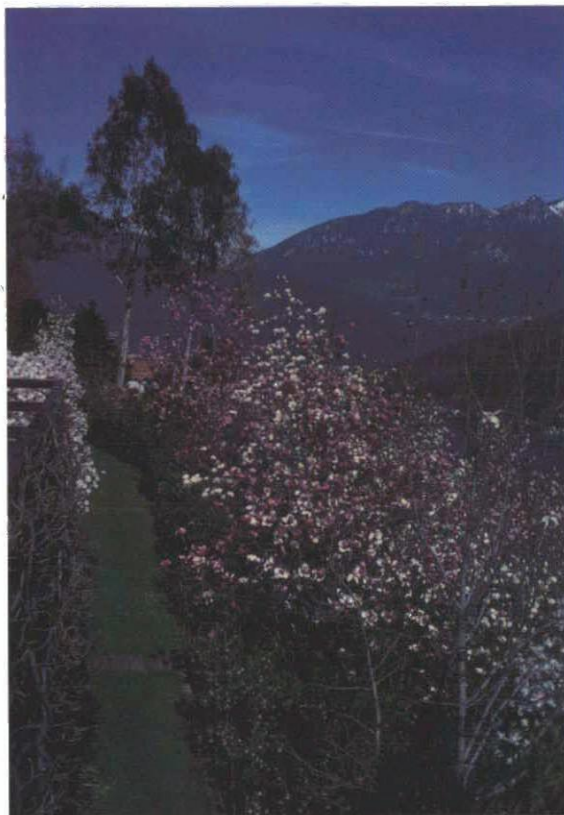
Sir Peter Smithers

It was in 1971 that the first magnolias were planted. The site was bare, and the small plants were hardly visible for the first two years. The idea was not to plant a magnolia garden, but to set up an ecosystem of exotic plants. This would consist of a high canopy of trees, an understory of shrubs, and terrestrials on the floor. The high canopy would consist entirely of magnolias.

How successful has the ecosystem been? The answer must be "more successful than I expected." Over the years some 15,000 different plants have been established. The early sun-lovers gradually dwindled and died as the shade grew. This was expected. The work of planting in the early years required a full time gardener and, in the first two years, a garden contractor to help plant plants of my choosing.

After about ten years, the magnolias had taken over. This is a favorable climate for growth and flowering. It was possible to dispense with the full-time gardener because the plants were doing much of the garden work, as they do in nature in the nearby forests where nobody prunes, sprays, or manures. However, as it turned out the magnolias were not an ideal choice for the high canopy. The canopy was all right, but the heavy fall of large leaves suffocated many small plants. But though that was not foreseen, it had to be accepted. I wanted to grow magnolias in quantity and variety. Oak or beech trees would have been better for the terrestrials but less interesting for me.

Today the magnolias are massive forest trees, which I look at with awe when I have time to reflect upon the subject. As for the ecosystem, it is working as foreseen insofar that with my increasing years and diminishing love of hard work, the labor in the garden has decreased spectacularly. A gardener two days a week in spring and



Peter Smithers

Clockwise, from top left to right: Young magnolias 12 years from planting; magnolias 24 years from planting; Magnolia 'Picture.'

summer and one day a week in winter is all that is required to maintain what is really a massive plant association.

An important witness to the genuine quality of the ecosystem is that it has been successful in pest control. When the garden was a bare, newly planted slope, we had regiments of rhododendron beetles and army corps of great slugs. The effect was devastating and had to be controlled with chemicals. But now, though both are still there, they are not a serious menace. Apparently in the dense undergrowth of shrubs and the heavy humus layer of fallen leaves, their enemies have established themselves. I am not sure what those enemies—my friends—are, but perhaps our three snake varieties, our salamander,



Peter Smithers

Clockwise, from top left: Magnolia 'Sundew' at 25 years from planting; this was a trial of Magnolias and many older varieties were sacrificed to gain space; of the *Soulangeanas*, only Brozzoni remains because of its very late blooming habit.

the birds that find refuge in the jungle growth, and others whose identity I cannot even guess, all play a part.

As for the magnolias, many with which we started are no longer there. This was in the nature of a trial and anything that had been surpassed by later breeding or selection was ruthlessly cut out. Only one *M. soulangeana* remains, 'Brozzoni,' which is valuable because of its lateness. But others are missing for different reasons. We had a mysterious fungus attack. A cyclical thing which was never identified. In spite of various treatments it killed a big plant of *M. campbellii*

'Landicla' and 'Pickard's Ruby.' It is probably still on the prowl. We lost a couple of big grandifloras, including 'Goliath,' the best of all, to *Armillaria mellea*, honey fungus. 'Goliath' was replaced, and I ate the honey fungus on toast for breakfast. We also had a casualty due to an error in watering. I did not notice that a sprinkler played directly upon the trunk of *M. denudata* 'Japanese Form,' a very beautiful specimen. The tree took three years to die but was determined to do so. Magnolias will not put up with this.

Seed is set in great abundance and seedlings appear in the garden from time to time. I have not distributed any seed in recent years because, in a collection of about 100 magnolias growing in a small area, raising seedlings would be the equivalent of a visit to the local casino. You might win but, but the odds are heavily against you. Planting a magnolia is a serious event in any garden, and unless one is very young and very optimistic, it is wiser to buy a named and identified plant. If one wants to breed magnolias then it is a serious matter, and one must isolate and hand-pollinate the flowers. The great magnolia breeders of the past such as the Chevalier Soulange, Charles Raffill, and Todd Gresham and those of the present day in our own Society are our benefactors. If one is not going to go the great amount of trouble which they undertake, it is better to buy their products.

And that brings me to the bitter experience that I had in buying magnolias, recounted in a much earlier issue of this paper. There was a well-known magnolia nursery in Cornwall, now deservedly defunct, from which I purchased important *M. campbellii* clones. The preface of the catalog boasted that they were all grafted plants. You would not grow an apple tree from seed, it said. Such was my simplicity that I did not verify to see if what they sent me were, in fact, grafts. After a wait of seven or eight years when the clones began to bloom, I found out. They were seedlings; worthy plants but not what I had paid for and wanted. Ever afterwards I was meticulously careful to examine what I was buying on arrival. Of course, some magnolias can be grown from cuttings, notably the magnificent 'Star Wars.' The reason probably is that they have *M. liliiflora* blood. If a plant can be thus

easily propagated, there is no motive to undertake the trouble and time of growing it from seed, so that one is relatively safe in such cases.

Membership of our Society was of the greatest possible benefit to me in setting up our magnolia woodland. It was a community, world-wide, communicating at least once a year through its publications and sometimes by post. I contributed articles when I felt that I had something of interest to say. In recent years others have much surpassed my work, and I have not felt entitled to take up space in this paper. But now, suddenly, it is different. I am gardening on the internet.

Yes, every morning on the screen from which I write there will be six, eight, ten letters about bulbous plants. Perhaps one of them will be addressed to me, but even if this is not so I may read them all. This is because the International Bulb Society (IBS) set up a "robin" for its members. One may write an email letter to any one of them, or the same letter may be sent to all of them electronically; about sixty in number to date. If one has a problem, throw it out into the "robin" and an answer will come back from one or more members with specialist knowledge, perhaps in Australia, Argentina, the United States, or New Zealand. The International Bulb Society comprises most of the scientists and gardeners interested in bulbous plants in a serious manner. The "robin" comprises those of them who are computer literate. Suddenly we are all in daily contact with one another as if we were sitting in a conference room together.

Suddenly, for the first time, the IBS is a community of specialists in daily contact with one another no matter where they happen to live. By doing no more than reading the correspondence every morning, I have learned about genera of the existence of which I never knew, about the newest and latest cultural techniques, about the history and genetics of plants which I have grown for years, about new breeding experiments, and about the availability of rare bulbous plants around the world. I am 84 years old and I never had more gardening fun in my life! 🌱